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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 ABUJA 001916

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SUBJECT: PRESIDENT'S OFFICE DENIES RUMORS OF IMMINENT
CABINET CHANGES

Classified By: Political Counselor James P. McAnulty
for reasons in Sections 1.4. (B) and (D)

SUMMARY

¶1. (C) The GON has again denied recurring rumors of Cabinet changes, but when and if a reshuffle does come, those apparently most at risk are the controversial and widely derided Ministers of Justice, Education, and Labor. END SUMMARY.

ATTORNEY GENERAL'S FINAL STRAW -- PERHAPS

¶2. (C) For months, civil libertarians have been calling for the dismissal of Justice Minister Michael Aondoakaa, a move that seems to have some support inside the GON. National Drug Law Enforcement Agency (NDLEA) Director General Lanre Ipinmisho (protect) predicted to INLOFF that President Yar'Adua would sack Aondoakaa after he declared publicly that his office had cleared three former governors -- James Ibori (Delta State), Bola Tinubu (Lagos State), and Victor Attah (Akwa Ibom State) -- of corruption charges related to a banking scandal. Ipinmisho described this statement as possibly the "final straw," with Yar'Adua not only pressing the AG to retract his statement but "ordering" the Economic Financial Crimes Commission (EFCC) to issue a statement contradicting the Minister. Aondoakaa later declared that political opponents and the media had manipulated his statements.

¶3. (C) Ipinmisho asserted that Yar'Adua empowered EFCC Chairperson Farida Waziri to sever her ties with Aondoakaa, whom Ipinmisho described as the main impediment to EFCC prosecutions. Alleging that the Minister had extorted money from suspects in exchange for protection against prosecution, he viewed both Aondoakaa and Ibori as liabilities to Yar'Adua's re-election.

¶4. (C) A presidential advisor told PolCouns, EconCouns, and PolOff October 16 that Yar'Adua had become aware of certain Cabinet members engaging in corrupt practices and posing an embarrassment for his administration, particularly Aondoakaa, who allegedly pocketed a bribe of 40 million Naira (about 267,000 dollars) from an Indian firm regarding an investigation into the Ajaokuta steel plant deal. He

remarked that Aondoakaa had reversed progress on prosecutions, taking the country backwards in this area, and opined that Yar'Adua would dismiss the Minister by December. He predicted other changes as well since the President recognizes he has "some round pegs in square holes."

LABOR MINISTER MAY ALSO GO

15. (C) Labor Minister Kayode has faced considerable public criticism for failing to resolve a months-long strike by public university professors. Since his December 2008 appointment, Kayode has seen eleven actual or threatened strikes from nearly all organized labor sectors. International Labor Organization (ILO) Social Dialogue Director Tayo Fashoyin told LabOff during the peak of threatened strikes in July that Kayode's "uncoordinated" response was unacceptable, with the Minister relying on ad hoc committees rather than sustainable solutions. While refusing to confirm a possible change, the Director General of the Ministry's training institute speculated separately to LabOff that Kayode could replace Aondoakaa due to his extensive legal experience, including as a Senior Advocate.

EDUCATION MINISTER ALSO UNDER FIRE

16. (C) Education Minister Egwu's performance during the university teachers strike has also elicited criticism within

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organized labor and academic circles. The Nigeria Labor Congress, one of Nigeria's largest organized labor consortiums, called for Egwu's resignation after the Minister allegedly threatened to stop paying striking university staff and evict them from campus grounds. The Minister's combative approach has also drawn ire from students, who staged their own protests to support striking professors. The Nigerian Union of Teachers threatened to shut down all public schools, if the university strike continued.

17. (C) Kano Governor Ibrahim Shekarau, who served for years as an educator, told PolCouns that Egwu should take his time in learning his portfolio and implementing changes in the education sector, which he described as a "large industry" in Nigeria. He criticized the Minister for being "arrogant" in his dealings with university union leaders. Shekarau, a member of the opposition All Nigeria People's Party, attributed the education crisis to the federal government's failure to honor negotiated labor agreements; if resource constraints were the problem, he said, the GON should so inform the unions.

PRESIDENTIAL SPOKESPERSON DENIES RUMORS

18. (SBU) Presidential spokesperson Olusegun Adeniyi recently denied to the press any "plan by the President to remove or replace any Minister at this point in time," and decried such rumors as distracting senior officials from their efforts to promote good governance.

19. (C) Kano Governor Shekarau remarked to PolCouns that reshuffling the Cabinet again would not necessarily promote the national interest. While acknowledging public pressure on Yar'Adua to upgrade a Cabinet widely perceived to be sub-par, he observed that senior officials needed continuity to develop knowledge and expertise. In Kano, for example, he said he instituted few changes among his Commissioners, largely for this reason. Ultimately, he said, leaders must choose good managers of people and resources, who can function well in any portfolio.

COMMENT

¶10. (C) The knives are out for several controversial ministers, but it is unclear when or if Yar'Adua will accede to lowering the boom or how the approaching 2011 elections might affect his calculations. As the biggest embarrassment and potential liability, Justice Minister Aondoakaa may be most at risk, though predictions of his imminent demise are no doubt fueled by wishful thinking. END COMMENT.

¶11. (U) Embassy coordinated this telegram with ConGen Lagos.

SANDERS